Black Prisoner's Death Probed

By Martin Dyckman
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TALLAHASSEE, Fla.—Lake County Sheriff Willis McCall, often denounced by civil rights spokesmen during his 28-year reign as one of Florida's most powerful lawmen, is undergoing an intensive gubernatorial investigation after the death of a black prisoner.

Florida Gov. Reubin Askew formally disclosed that McCall is a possible "principal suspect" when the governor moved to shift the investigation out of McCall's jurisdiction.

And a team of inspectors sent by the governor to visit McCall's jail reported "racial animosity" evident among the staff — so much so that one unidentified "official" refused to shake the hand of a black member of the inspection team.

McCall has blamed the probe on the long-standing antagonism of civil rights groups. "The NAACP, the American Civil Liberties Union — they've always been involved," he told the Associated Press. "It's definitely political . . . even you can figure that out. They leave me alone for three years, and then create all this publicity during an election year."

Edgar M. Dunn Jr., the governor's general counsel, denied McCall's inference.

The black prisoner, Tommy J. Vickers, 34, of Miami, died in a Lake County hospital April 23, three days after being transferred from McCall's jail in Tavares.

A coroner's jury found he died of peritonitis resulting from an abdominal injury suffered by "mischance or accident" for which "persons unknown" were responsible.

It has been learned that among complaints referred to the governor are charges that McCall himself kicked the man during a commotion in Vickers' cell. McCall, on April 14, had petitioned to have Vickers declared insane and transferred to a state hospital.

Ironically, Vickers was in jail for nothing worse than driving with an expired automobile inspection sticker. Lake County had sent a deputy to Miami to get him on April 12 after he failed to post a $26 bond by mail.

In 1949, McCall prevented lynching of three black suspects accused of raping a young white woman. But he couldn't stop mobs of whites who roamed the county attacking black homes, and the National Guard had to be sent in.

Two of the men were tried and condemned. In 1951, while returning them to Lake County to stand a new trial the U.S. Supreme Court had ordered, McCall shot both, killing one. He claimed they had attacked him while he was changing a flat tire. The surviving prisoner said the shooting was unprovoked.

McCall once boasted to a newsman that he has survived 37 investigations.

In this one, Askew has taken unusual steps — such as having a judge transfer the investigation to an Orange County (Orlando) grand jury and ordering the removal of inmate witnesses from McCall's jail.

McCall has appealed to a higher court in hope of overturning the transfer order and that case is pending.

Meanwhile, Askew sent in a five-man jail inspection team headed by a deputy state director of corrections—which denounced the jail for poor sanitation, ventilation, plumbing and nutrition, insufficient bedding, lack of recreation for inmates and the scheduling of visiting hours on weekday afternoons when inmates working on the roads aren't there to be visited.

"There appears to be no interest by the administration in applying modern correctional techniques," the team noted.

For all that, the team also said McCall's jail is "no better and no worse than the majority" of other local jails in Florida.